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ROYAL MOTIFS IN THE HEBREW PSALTER

A PART OF A DISSERTATION SUBMITTED TO
THE FACULTY OF THE DIVINITY SCHOOL
IN CANDIDACY FOR THE DEGREE OF
DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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This study stands at the confluence of two streams of scholarly research: (1) the study of the religious aspects of kings and kingship; and (2) the exposition of ancient Hebrew religion and literature, particularly the Psalter. It is an attempt to open the field for research regarding the religious significance of the Hebrew king by determining the existence in the psalms of both definite references to the king and the use of royal motifs.

Psalms 20, 21, 18, 61, 63, 45, 72, 2, 89, and 144 contain a definite reference to a melek (king). Three alternative interpretations of the melek in this group have been suggested: (1) a true pre-exilic Hebrew king; (2) a Maccabaean prince; and (3) an ideal, eschatological figure. A close, unbiased investigation, however, shows the extreme probability that the melek in these psalms is to be taken in its most natural sense to refer to an actual pre-exilic Hebrew king.

In four of these melek-psalms the king is definitely identified as "the anointed" (meshiah).¹ When we couple with this fact that in pre-exilic Israel the king, and only the king, was called "the anointed"² we are prepared to entertain the probability that in the remaining four psalms of "the anointed," the king is meant. A close examination of Psalms 28, 84, and 132 further confirms this hypothesis.

¹Psalms 2:2c; 18:51; 20:7; 89:52.

²I Samuel 2:10; 24:7,11; 26:9,11,16,23; II Samuel 1:14,16; 2:10,35; 16:6; 19:22; II Chronicles 6:42.

Since we have seen the king designated in thirteen psalms of our collection it stands to reason that there may be others in which the king or traces of kingship appear without formal mention. Mowinckel and Gressmann had already surmised as much, and it is our task to test this surmise.

In preparation for this search we may examine our already determined psalms of the king for the royal motifs displayed in them. (1) The king enjoys a very close personal relationship to God, is his son,¹ bound to him in love.² God, in turn, is his "shield," "rock" and intimate protector.³ (2) Then, as religious head of the nation the king participates in a series of religious acts, among which may be mentioned: (a) a time of testing of ordeal⁴ in which he is rejected by God,⁵ forcibly excluded from the temple,⁶ and subjected to disgrace and tauntings;⁷ (b) a response with a confession of innocence;⁸ (c) and experience of death or near death in Sheol or the pit;⁹ (d) a prayer for deliverance and resurrection from this "death";¹⁰ (e) a vow to praise and play instruments to Yahweh before the assembly or among the nations if and when he is delivered;¹¹ (f) the people's intercession on the king's behalf;¹² (g) recitation of "Creation-epic" liturgical

¹Psalms 2:7; 89:27.

²Psalms 18:2.

³Psalms 18:3; 28:8; 89:27; 144:2.

⁴Psalms 20:2; 84:6 f.

⁵Psalms 89:34-46.

⁶Psalms 63:2-7.

⁷Psalms 89:51 f.; 132:1. Cf. the priestly humiliation and smiting of the king on the fifth day of the Babylonian Akitu festival, C. J. Gadd, "Babylonian Myth and Ritual," in Myth and Ritual, edited by S. H. Hooke (London: Oxford University Press, 1933), pp. 53 f.

⁸Psalms 18:22-24.

⁹Psalms 18:5 f.; 61:3; 28:1; 89:49; 144:7.

¹⁰Psalms 18:4,7; 28:1-3,9; 61:2; 63:2 f.; 84:9 f.

¹¹Psalms 18:50; 61:9; 63:5; 89:2.

¹²Psalms 20:21; 72 entire. Cf. particularly 72:15.

pieces;¹ (h) the raising of a victory standard;² (i) victory and deliverance of king;³ (j) entrance of the king into the inner sanctuary;⁴ (k) the destruction of the enemies;⁵ (l) the grant of long life,⁶ as long as the sun's and the moon's,⁷ of military prowess,⁸ and world-rule;⁹ (m) the decree of fertility and productivity for the king's own dynasty,¹⁰ and for the whole nation.¹¹

(3) The king is the representative "I-speaker" of the nation, summing up in his own person and office the weal or woe of the entire people, speaking sometimes as an individual, and sometimes in the name of the corporate group.¹²

Scholars have already applied the criteria of character and function of royalty to discover the king in Psalm 101. Similarly, there has been fairly general agreement among critics that Psalm 110 contains an oracle spoken to an actual king. Some would refer it to the Maccabaeen Simon or Jonathan, the majority of recent scholars take it as pre-exilic. Against the reference to an eschatological messianism are such realistic dramatically present features as the seating at the right hand of deity, the placing of the royal footstool, the granting of the royal scepter and finally the divine decree and oath. The extravagant language as

¹Psalms 18:8-16; 89:9-13.

²Psalm 20:6.

³Psalms 18:17-21; 20:3,5-10; 21:3 f.; 10-13; 144:11.

⁴Psalms 61:5; 63:3,8; 84:2,3,8,11.

⁵Psalms 2:9; 18:28; 28:4; 63:10 f.; 132:18.

⁶Psalms 21:5; 61:7 f.

⁷Psalm 72:5,17.

⁸Psalms 18:33-49; 20:5 f.; 21:9 f.; 45:4-6; 72:10 f.; 144:1 f.

⁹Psalms 2:8; 18:44-48; 45:18; 72:9-11; 89:27.

¹⁰Psalms 45:17; 72:19; 89:30,37-38; 132:11-12.

¹¹Psalms 72:6,19; 132:14 f.

¹²Cf. Psalm 18:24 with 18:26-28; cf. 28:1-7 with 28:8 f.; cf. 20:2-5 with 20:6; cf. 21:2-13 with 21:14. See also 84:10 and 89:51 f.

applied to the king is in line with that of the royal psalms 2, 18, 45, and 72. It would appear to be a psalm written for a coronation ceremony for an actual king.¹

Psalm 118 has only been taken as royal by a few isolated scholars. Its significance as a liturgical piece for the king's ritual has been well presented by A. R. Johnson.² The speaker here suffers a time of trial (verses 5, 13), comes through victoriously (verses 10-12), is feted in his victory by the populace (verses 15 f.). He is the focus-point of the hopes and aspirations of the people and marches in triumph through the "Victory Gates" (verses 17 ff.), and, though formerly rejected, he is made head of the corner on the "day which Yahweh has made" (verses 21-24). He is the one who enters in the name of Yahweh (verse 26). The psalm then appropriately closes with a description of the fertility rite of binding a bag to the horns of the altar, a closing shout of praise by the king for the close relationships which exist between him and God, and a liturgical address to the group to give thanks to Yahweh for his kindness.

Psalm 80, likewise, has only been recognized as royal by one or two isolated critics. Someone prays that Yahweh's hand be upon "the man of thy right hand" upon the "son of man thou hast raised up for thyself" (verse 18) for he has not turned back from Yahweh (verse 19a). All this fits the king. As intercessor for the people he could well have been the speaker of the psalm, referring to himself in the third person and only at the end of the

¹Cf. the detailed study of the psalm from this point of view by T. Gaster, "Psalm 110," Journal of the Manchester Egyptian and Oriental Society, XXI (1937), 37-44.

²A. R. Johnson, "The Rôle of the King in the Jerusalem Cultus," chap. 111 of The Labyrinth, edited by S. H. Hooke (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1935), pp. 105-107.

psalm revealing his identity. If the speaker is the later high priest, we can say, with all assurance that he has taken over many of the characteristics of royalty and we are still right in seeing "royal motifs" in the psalm.

The similarity in thought and language between Psalm 42-43 and our previously noted Psalm 84 has long been recognized. The speaker, like the king in Psalm 63, is forcibly barred from the temple, but confidently expects to participate again in the temple service (43:3-5). True to the pattern he undergoes a severe discipline of chastisement and taunting. He remembers the rôle he had played in former rituals that he has passed along in the בֵּית אֱלֹהִים, read by the Greek and Vulgate as בֵּית אֱלֹהִים "the resplendent booth." If we may connect this with the reference in Amos 5:26 where the Greek again restores the original sense of a procession of the "booth of thy king," made parallel to the images of Kiwan, we see what has been intentionally obscured here: a ritual procession in which the king and possibly divine effigies were carried along in a booth or palanquin. We may link this with the ritual procession already noted in Psalm 118, and see that what the speaker is contemplating is his former participation in this royal procession, probably as king. In any event, the pattern is that of our king psalms, and the psalm may rightly be credited with royal motifs.

Psalm 4 has been traditionally accepted as the expression of quite an ordinary worshipper. The royal coloring, however, is evident. The speaker has had his "glory" exchanged for shame. A little study of the term kabod (glory) shows that it is used most frequently of the glory of kings. In Psalm 21:6, for example, the king's kabod is said to be great because of the deliverance Yahweh grants him and in 84:12b, kabod is Yahweh's gift to the king. It

is used similarly of kings in the historical books and prophets,¹ and even in Job with the employment of definitely royal motifs.² When King Uzziah was smitten and rejected by Yahweh the statement was made that his kabod no longer existed in the sight of Yahweh Elohim.³ Like Uzziah, the speaker in Psalm 4 is one whose kabod is gone. With this removal of the king's glory we may compare the previously mentioned ritual humbling of the Babylonian king on the fifth day of the Akitu festival when, as part of the ritual, the priest removed one by one all the monarch's royal regalia (his kabod), and in humiliation forced him to his knees before the god.⁴ A quite general use of the term kabod to mean "honor" is to be observed, chiefly in the wisdom literature.⁵ The evolution of the concept seems to have been from the radiance of deity to the glory and splendor of kings, a development attested by the Egyptian and Mesopotamian cultures.⁶ Only then did the idea filter down to the common man. Then in verse 4 of Psalm 4 the parallelism shows that the speaker is a hasid (pious one) set apart by Yahweh "for himself." In Psalm 89:20 the speaker, in all probability, as we have seen, the king, likewise calls himself a hasid, and the fact that Yahweh in person chose and

¹Cf. I Kings 2:13; Isaiah 8:7; 14:18; I Chronicles 17:18; II Chronicles 1:11 f.; 17:5; 18:1; 32:27,33.

²Job 19:9; 29:20; cf. vs. 25. ³II Chronicles 26:18.

⁴Gadd, op. cit., pp. 53 f.

⁵Proverbs 3:16; 8:18; 11:16; 15:33; 18:12; Ecclesiastes 6:2; 10:1; Malachi 1:6.

⁶Compare Hatshepsut "shining in brightness like 'the Horizon-God,' Rayet she illuminates like the sun." J. H. Breasted, Ancient Records of Egypt (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1906-1907), II, 325; and Amenhotep III "shining in the chariot like the rising sun" (ibid., II, 858). Tukulti Urta I was "sun of all peoples" (D. D. Luckenbill, Ancient Records of Assyria and Babylonia [Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1926-27], I, 142, 159; and Assur-nasir-apal was "king of glory" (ibid., I, 488).

anointed the king for himself is echoed in Psalm 2:6 and 89:20 f. In verse 6 the speaker reveals himself as some sort of leader of the people who commands the offering of sacrifices, "victory sacrifices," apparently in his behalf, for the result of these sacrifices is seen in his sublime joy (verse 8) "more than the time [when] their grain and new wine increase." With this offering of sacrifices for the king we may compare the prayer in his behalf (Psalms 20, 72) and the victory standards raised in his behalf (20:6). Every evidence seems to point to the king, but if it is only a common individual that is meant, we may safely say that the poet has employed royal motifs in describing his experience.

Psalm 8, usually taken as an ode to the dignity of man and glory of God, expresses itself in royal terms: he is made but little below God, "crowned" (like a king) with kabod (verse 6) and made to "rule" over creation. If this refers to man in general it does so in terms of a king. Here are the elements of popular acclaim (verse 3), creation-motif (verse 4), the coronation (verse 6), and gift of world rule (verses 7 ff.), all apparently modelled after the typical royal pattern.

Psalms 15 and 24, both concerned with the qualifications of the man who is to ascent to the temple area, stand in the "holy place" and be justified by God. In 15:4b the speaker is one who is in position to "honor" the god-fearing and in verse 5 he is promised an everlasting permanence, which fits in well with the perennial royal desire for a permanent rule and dynasty. The ritual procession is described more in detail in Psalm 24:7-10. The image or symbol of Yahweh has been carried to the east gate and the chant for the opening for the gates is given. That Yahweh is the one proclaimed "king of glory" does not mean that the earthly king was not there in person as his representative.

While the evidence is not conclusive, it points again here in the direction of royalty, or at least the use of royal motifs.

The speaker of Psalm 16 is at Yahweh's right hand (verse 8b) and, as in Psalm 15, it is of moment that he be not moved or shaken. In verse 10 the speaker, like the king, prays for deliverance from Sheol and the pit and in verse 11 reaffirms his high position by affirming the great joy that is his at God's right hand. If the speaker is not the king he is at least painted in royal colors.

Psalm 17 is the expression of a speaker who tells, in true royal style, his severe testing at the hands of Yahweh, but his innocence through it all. He stands at the right hand of deity (verse 7); asks that he be protected like the homoculus of the eye, be protected under the divine wings, a prerogative, as Gressmann has shown,¹ of kings. The royal motifs are thus evident.

The royal pattern is again evident in the turbulent Psalm 22. The psalm opens with the speaker's cry over his rejection,² for which he mourns day and night (verse 3).³ Then the speaker marks himself as a singular individual whose whole existence has been bound up with that of Yahweh: he has been cast upon Yahweh from birth, a motif common to the royal pattern of both Egypt and Mesopotamia. In verse 23 he characteristically promises to praise the deity before the whole assembly and in verses 24 f. reveals his representative character by turning to the people and exhorting them to praise God for his deliverance, a deliverance so important that because of it the whole world will join in praising

¹H. Gressmann, "The Development of Hebrew Psalmody," in D. C. Simpson, The Psalmists (London: Oxford University Press, 1926), pp. 14 f.

²Cf. Psalms 42:10; 89:39; 118:18.

³Cf. Psalms 42:4,10; 43:2; 84:7; 132:2-10.

Yahweh (verses 27-32).

The speaker in Psalm 27 prays that he may dwell in the house of Yahweh the rest of his life. He will be hid in the sukah (cf. 42:5) in the inner sanctuary, will sacrifice there (verse 6) and will look upon Yahweh's image (verse 8). He is Yahweh's servant, but in some danger of being rejected, as was every king (verse 9). He is a man cut off from human ties, reared only by Yahweh (verse 10). His ability to walk the narrow path of success is necessary because of the ever-present enemy (verse 11). He would seem to be the king, but if not is employing royal motifs.

Psalm 35 depicts a speaker, who promises to praise Yahweh before the whole assembly (verse 18) and who calls for God to rise for judgment (verse 23). Verse 27 presents the typical royal psalm picture of the multitude of righteous ones awaiting the victory of the king and ready to shout at the time of victory.

In Psalm 54:8 the speaker promises to present offerings to Yahweh, either "with liberality" or, as technically used as early as D, for the "festive meal."¹ If the first meaning is correct it is most appropriately the king who can give rich and generous offerings. If the second is right, as is more probable, we have a reference to the Near Eastern royal practice of furnishing the bounties for the ritual feast.

The speaker of Psalm 57 takes refuge under the divine wings (verse 2) when harassed, and chants an incantation to bring the dawn of victory (verses 8-12) with its resurrection of the deity (verse 12). This would seem to be the typical instrument-playing king of the ritual (verses 8, 9), who promises to praise Yahweh among the peoples and nations (verse 10). There can be little doubt of the representative character of the speaker in

¹Deuteronomy 16:10. Cf. also Ezra 3:5.

Psalm 59; he is the head of the people who are to learn from his experience (verse 12). The enemies of the speaker are the enemies of the nation and the nation is dependent upon the victory which he, their king, achieves in the ritual. As king he sings to and praises God whose close fellowship he enjoys (verses 17 f.).

The speaker in Psalm 65 reveals his representative rôle in verse 4 where both he and his people are brought into juxtaposition: his guilt is their guilt. In verse 5cd the speaker reaches out and includes the whole people in his representative personality. The remainder of the poem also reflects royal touches on God's creative power (verses 7 f.) and the fertility with which he blesses flock and field (verses 10-14). In Psalm 66 the speaker vows that he will enter the sanctuary (verse 13) and offer fatlings, rams, an ox, and he-goats (verses 14 f.), an offering befitting a king. Turning, then, to the assembly he testifies to Yahweh's deliverance (verses 16-19) based upon his kingly innocence (verses 18 f.). In Psalm 68:28 the royal processions are seen, with "Benjamin ruling them" and in verse 30 the malekim are actually mentioned as bringing gifts to Yahweh, either Hebrew kings or vassal kings, in either case from the time of the monarchy.

The identity of the speaker in Psalm 69 is revealed in verse 10 where he is seen to be the bearer of the god's reproaches, for he is "servant" of the deity (verse 18). Both God and men have smitten him (verse 27). His deliverance is cause not only for the rejoicing of the group who look on (verse 33) but even for the praise of God by all heaven, earth and sea (verse 35) of such importance is it.

The speaker of Psalm 71 has been reared by God from his mother's womb (verse 6) and is either now old or anticipates his

old age (verses 9-12). Those about him are making plans to take life but are first awaiting a sign of God's rejection. The pattern is that of the slaying of the king when his virility fails lest the community share in the weakened plight of its leader. Compare the anxious testing of David's virility in II Kings 1:1 ff.

Psalm 78 is a lengthy historical sketch significantly ending with an account of David's call to be shepherd over the people (verses 70 f.) pointing convincingly to the use of this psalm in a ritual following Yahweh's awakening from sleep (verse 65) when the kingship was exalted as the culmination of Yahweh's dealing with his people. Psalm 82 is an interesting pronouncement upon divine king in which both strong concessions are made to and penetrating criticisms levelled at the sacred kingship system whether Hebrew or foreign we are only left to guess.

The literal rendering of Psalm 87 makes it a paean on Zion as the birthplace of a man who will "establish" the city (verse 5b), whose name will be written on the heavenly tablets, and his coming will set the minds of princes whirling. Because of its graphic description it must refer to an actual yet unborn king and no eschatological messiah. Psalm 88 is the lament of one who has been on the brink of death since his youth, possibly the king who has suffered severe ritual testings since his coronation.

Psalm 91 is addressed throughout to and about an individual who from his characteristics could be a king. He is one who dwells under Elyon's special protection and shadow (verse 1), is covered with the divine wings (verse 4), bears a charmed life (verses 7-13), protected by heavenly beings (verses 11 f.), and is bound to Yahweh in a love relationship by virtue of which he is elevated to a high rank (verse 14) and granted "long life" (verse 16). The speaker of Psalm 92 has been anointed and exalted

by Yahweh (verse 11) and will flourish like the palm and the Lebanon cedar (verse 12); in fact, all such righteous kings will flourish in Yahweh's court full of virility to old age.

Our task has been that of taking one short step in the direction of the whole restudy of the relationship of the Psalter to the official or royal rituals. In so far as we have made our point, that there are motifs of royalty in a number of psalms other than those usually so considered by commentators, to that extent have we opened the subject for future study. Future research must wrestle with the problems of the royal rituals, the ideological framework of the Hebrew kingship system, the perpetuation of such ideas in the post-exilic cultus and literature, and their survival in the various forms of messianism and divine kingship ideologies since that day.

